

Rearrange the Stars

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13060161) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13060161>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Major Character Death
Categories:	F/F , Gen , M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter , Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter , Bedelia Du Maurier/Hannibal Lecter , Bedelia Du Maurier/Freddie Lounds
Characters:	Will Graham , Hannibal Lecter , Bedelia Du Maurier , Freddie Lounds , Dr. Frederick Chilton , Franklyn Froideveaux , Abel Gideon , Jack Crawford , Kade Prurnell , Matthew Brown (Hannibal) , Alana Bloom , Chiyoh (Hannibal)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Gods & Goddesses , Fictional Religion & Theology , God!Will , Ancient/Fantasy world , Hints of Ancient Chinese influences , Hanni has no chill , Slow Burn , fancy parties , non-sexual Hannibal/Bedelia , Snark , Conversations , So much talking , Canon- Typical Violence , Cannibalism , Everyone's kind of a cannibal tbh , Blood and Gore , Death , Minor Character Death , Major Character Deaths are not Hannibal or Will
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-12-27 Updated: 2018-02-06 Words: 14,040 Chapters: 5/15

Rearrange the Stars

by [chronicopheliac](#)

Summary

Life is pretty dull for Hannibal Lecter. That is, until he meets a beautiful, brilliant, and very rude man. Hannibal is immediately smitten. Unfortunately, he has no idea who this man is...

Notes

Welp. This was a Tumblr prompt, but it's gone completely off the rails. So instead of something short and sweet, it's kind of looking more like 20k+ words. It's more than half written, and I will be posting once a week (probably Tuesday nights for me but we'll see how I feel next week XD). Tags will be updated accordingly!

Chapter 1

For most of his life, Hannibal cared nothing for the gods. If there was ever a time he did, it had died along with his family long ago. It was that which earned his contempt. Senseless deaths of devout, innocent people the gods did nothing to prevent.

And so it was that he took great pleasure in disparaging the gods at every opportunity. Defiling their shrines, laughing dismissively at the rituals others performed in their honour. Urging people to abandon their allegiances to gods who never listened.

It was a greater pleasure that not once had he suffered any ill effects for his so-called heresy.

“If what I say is so blasphemous,” Hannibal said, addressing the partygoers crowded around him, “then let the god of storms himself strike me down. I assure you he will not.”

Scandalized gasps murmured through the listeners. Some held their fingers to their lips - an apology to the god of storms on Hannibal's behalf.

“Has it occurred to you it's because you're insignificant to him?” An unfamiliar voice came to him from the crowd. It belonged to an unfamiliar face. Devastatingly beautiful, pale skin framed by soft, dark curls.

Hannibal laughed, at once fascinated by this stranger and his complete lack of courtesy. “If that is so, why should I spend a moment of my time concerning myself with him?”

There was nervous laughter, but no answer from anyone.

“Ah, you've got me there. I suppose if you don't matter, neither does anything you say. Carry on, then.” The stranger smiled, and slipped away from the group. He grabbed a goblet of wine from a passing servant.

No longer obscured by the crowd, Hannibal saw the man wore a simple tunic and trousers made of white cotton, beneath a short brown robe. Though the clothing looked finely made, the style was what one might expect from a wandering swordsman.

Compelled to follow, Hannibal excused himself and took up a goblet for himself on the way. He caught up with the stranger in a quiet corner, away from the revelry of the party.

“Did you stop to listen just so you could insult me in front of everyone?” Hannibal drank in the sight of the man. Expressive blue eyes, hinting at an ageless wisdom. His lips had an exquisite bow shape, and the colour was a rather sensuous shade of pink. Upon closer inspection, Hannibal noticed delicate embroidery along the edges of his sleeves. An eye-catching pattern of feathers and flourishes.

“You were speaking foolishly,” said the stranger.

“Was I?”

“The gods may not be so omnipotent as many believe, but it’s only a matter of time before you’re caught. They won’t be pleased.”

Hannibal leaned in close, to catch the man’s scent. Sweet and honeyed, with a blend of something earthy. Divine. “You sound certain.”

“I’m simply saying you’d be wise to keep your blasphemy to yourself.” The man met Hannibal’s eyes. “Lest you find yourself on the wrong side of a god’s wrath.”

“Is that a threat?”

“A warning. Be careful, Hannibal. You never know when there might be gods in your midst.” And with an enigmatic smile, he vanished into the crowd.

Presumptuous as the man was, Hannibal found it impossible not to be charmed. And intrigued.

He couldn’t be from Balt. Hannibal knew anyone worth knowing in the city, and there was no way he would have missed this rude, beautiful stranger. And how did he know Hannibal’s name?

If this stranger did know him somehow, he should have known well enough not to insult him. As physician to the king, Hannibal had great influence in the city. Though no one would speak of it aloud, people knew he’d been responsible for more than one ruined family.

And yet, this stranger insulted him publicly. Continued to defy him in private, as though he were *better*. Smarter.

Hannibal was curious to see him again.

There was no news of a stranger in the city. No hint of any guests in someone’s house, or a new resident building his own house. It was impossible, or rather, unacceptable that his stranger would appear and vanish in one evening, never to be heard from or seen again.

Hannibal wouldn’t accept it. Couldn’t.

The search for his stranger’s identity proved difficult. Describing him was rather troublesome. Many young men had dark curls and blue eyes, and there were enough of them who could be considered beautiful. Trying to explain the exquisiteness of his stranger’s beauty only garnered strange and doubtful looks. Hannibal needed to know more. A title, a name.

It was a daunting problem.

Standing by the partition dividing the master bedroom, Hannibal glared at the painted phoenix form of the goddess Alannah. It offered no answers.

“You’re embarrassing yourself, Hannibal,” Bedelia said. She didn’t look up at Hannibal as she spoke, far more interested in reading a scroll against Frederica’s creamy thigh. It was impressive how even lounging half-dressed, between another woman’s legs, Bedelia still managed to look dignified.

Hannibal’s mouth twitched. “And how exactly am I doing that, my darling wife?”

“Three noble houses you’ve visited in as many days. Asking after some imaginary stranger. More beautiful than the god Brion himself, I’m given to understand. People talk, Hannibal. Lady Komeda tells me you were quite... animated. She was concerned.”

“It would make sense that you made him up.” Frederica tucked a long, golden pin into Bedelia’s hair. She fixed the knot so the delicate chains dangled straight, then tucked another pin on the other side. “You’re always complaining how bored you are. Everyone’s so *boring*. Poor *me*, the great Hannibal, suffering in a cesspool of mediocrity.”

But of course Hannibal should have known Frederica wouldn’t waste an opportunity to torment him. Her confidence in Bedelia’s ability to protect her from his temper made her far too bold.

He paced the room, hands folded behind his back. “I haven’t lost my mind, wench. Had I imagined him, I wouldn’t have made him quite so rude. Nor would he have disappeared before I fully enjoyed his company.”

Bedelia let out a long-suffering sigh. “And you wouldn’t be half as interested in him now.”

Infuriating as it was to admit, Bedelia had a point. It was easy to enjoy a brief encounter with some pretty thing, but Hannibal lost interest almost as soon as he had them. “I wasn’t the only one who spoke with him that evening. He exists, and I will find him.”

Frederica pressed her lips together, holding back a snicker. “It’s about time he stopped barking up your tree when he gets lonely.” She slid a hand down the front of Bedelia’s robe. “Never was very interested in sharing.”

“As though you’ve ever had a choice,” Hannibal said with an edge in his tone.

“Behave, Frederica dear.” Tilting her head, Bedelia brushed her lips against Frederica’s, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I suppose, then, we should support my dear husband. See if we can find out anything about this divine vision.”

“Mm. I’ll see if I can rustle anything up. If no one knows anything, we can always send him away for an exorcism.” A breath caught in Frederica’s throat at Bedelia’s fingers sneaking up the inside of her thigh.

“That is an excellent idea, Frederica. Perhaps I shall arrange for your exorcism first, and you can tell me all about it.”

Frederica's eyes widened. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I? You're getting far too insolent, Frederica. You would be wise to remember your place in this house."

Bedelia shot Hannibal a warning glance. "No one will be getting any exorcisms. I will ask if anyone knows this stranger in my way, and Frederica will ask in her way. Isn't that right, Frederica?"

Relaxing once more under Bedelia's touch, Frederica still kept a wary eye trained on Hannibal. "Right. Of course."

This time, it was Hannibal who let out the long-suffering sigh. "I suppose I must thank you for the effort. But I will continue to make my own efforts, as well. Now. If you'll excuse me, I'm expected at Gideon's home."

Bedelia laid back, her robe falling open as Frederica kissed a path down over the swell over her breast. Though she looked composed, Bedelia's voice betrayed a tremor of arousal. "Please try to stay reasonable at least, Hannibal. If Abel says he doesn't know him, he doesn't know him."

"I'm always reasonable," Hannibal called back, but the women did not seem to hear him.

As he slipped out the door, he heard Bedelia's breathy voice say, "Tell me everything," and Frederica's answering giggle. Why they took all that time dressing up each other's hair with all those ornaments only to play foolish bedroom games was quite beyond him.

Gideon had, as expected, nothing to tell. Nor did the Tiers, nor Budge. Each day, Hannibal set out to another acquaintance, someone else who had been at the banquet. It was disconcerting to think he might have imagined this man. The vision was so vivid in his mind. His memories entirely convinced the image of the man belonged in the party. It was real. He was real. He had to be.

Hannibal followed the winding path of his garden, his gait heavy with tension. As he passed a large stone, its familiarity soothed something in his chest. The porous limestone appeared more golden in the afternoon light, a beacon with a halo of plum blossoms. There was fluidity to its asymmetry. It came up in a great, sweeping arc, like two lovers lost to the throes of passion. It always reminded him of his dear aunt and uncle. *Patience*, they would tell him. *Everything you deserve will be yours in due time.*

Passing a cluster of peonies, he trailed his fingers across delicate petals. Their vibrant shades of pink and red evoked thoughts of his stranger's lips. He wondered what it would feel like to run a fingertip over the exquisite flesh. How they would feel against his own. Their fragrance filled the air, bolstering Hannibal's desire. He would know this man, one way or another.

Hannibal lingered at the lotus pavilion. The occasional splash of koi in the pond brought him a measure of peace. It calmed his mind as he searched for a revelation amongst the colourful lilies and lotus blossoms. Some clue as to who his beautiful stranger could be.

Perhaps the man was from a nearby city. A delegate or an ambassador. Or maybe he was from another kingdom entirely. A spy sent to uncover secrets and sow discord among the powerful. Some suggested, in the thinly veiled manner of the rich, perhaps Hannibal had been drunk. Or was losing his mind. That he'd imagined the beautiful creature with a clever tongue.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't hear Frederica approach.

"I've got good news, and bad news," she said, looking out to the pond as she stood beside him. "You'll probably want the good news first. Actually, it might be more accurate to say I've got bad news and worse news."

"And?" Hannibal shot her a withering look.

"O-okay. So. I only have one bit of news. Which is that there's no news. I couldn't find out anything."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"Well, it's... strange. When I ask if anyone remembers someone humiliating you at a banquet recently, they do. But when I ask if anyone remembers the one who did it, no one can answer. They just draw a blank."

Hannibal folded his hands behind him, clenched into fists. "Do you have reason to believe they're withholding information?"

"What? No, why would they? It's not like you're asking about some evil plot against the king, right?"

"That's absurd."

"Right. So. Why are you so interested in this man? You only spoke to him for what, ten minutes? After he publicly eviscerated you?"

"I wouldn't say it was quite that bad," Hannibal said.

"That's not how I've been hearing it. I heard you got destroyed." Frederica leaned against the rail, biting her lip to hold back a smile.

"People tend to exaggerate."

"So what's the deal?"

"He was... different. Interesting."

When Hannibal didn't elaborate further, Frederica said, "Something shiny and new. Got it," and started back toward the house. She paused at the exit bridge. "Oh, I'm supposed to tell you dinner's ready."

Hannibal nodded without looking back. "I'll be there in a moment."

Though Frederica hadn't been able to find anything out about his stranger's identity, she had discovered something curious indeed. People remembered the moment his stranger made himself known. They remembered his presence in the conversation. But asking about him directly presented a problem.

If Hannibal didn't know better, he might have said it was as though the gods had interfered.

A fortnight of searching turned up nothing. Hannibal began to suspect he might be losing his mind after all. He'd gone to every noble house, every scholar and military general. He felt no closer to discovering the identity of his mysterious nymph.

He was dangerously close to despair.

It was fortunate a distraction presented itself in the king, who was suffering from some curious ailment of the stomach. It was, from what Hannibal could tell, simply a case of too much wine. But it gave him something else to do while his mind worked itself into a frenzy.

The king was tedious company. A lofty man, immodest. Everyone in the royal court knew King Frederick had gained his position through subterfuge and trickery, but none yet dared defy him.

Just as Hannibal felt the early stirrings of regret, someone begged an audience.

"Send them away! Can't you see I'm ill?" King Frederick waved a dismissive hand at his steward, Franklyn, trembling at his feet.

"My apologies, your Majesty, but the man insists it's a matter of great importance."

"My good man! Need I remind you. *Nothing* is more important than my health."

"Yes, of course your Majesty. I will send him away." Franklyn made a hasty retreat.

King Frederick snorted. "I tell you, Hannibal, people will say 'but your Majesty! You must listen to your subjects!' or 'King Frederick! Your manner is too cold!'. But if I granted an audience to every man who sought me, those same meddling bastards would think me too yielding!"

The smile Hannibal gave didn't reach his eyes. "Indeed, your Majesty."

“They think I don’t know they’re all looking for some sign of weakness. They can’t wait to see me fall. All of them, vultures! I can’t risk everything I’ve built on a few extra kindnesses.”

“There are certainly those who would take advantage.”

“Exactly! So you see, it’s not that I don’t *want* to help them. Really I’m a very kind, compassionate man at heart. But. Give them an inch, as they say.”

“As you say, your--”

“M-my lord!” Franklyn’s voice echoed from the doorway. “U-uh, my lord! P-please! Y-you can’t go in--!”

“Forgive the intrusion, King Frederick.”

That voice.

Hannibal looked to the door, and there was his mysterious stranger. All unruly curls and intensity in his gaze as he approached the throne.

“What do you think you’re doing? I sent you away!” King Frederick shouted.

“Indeed you did, Your Majesty.” The man’s gaze caught on Hannibal, and lingered before focusing on King Frederick. “But I do believe you have need of me, and I’ve come to offer my services.”

Hannibal’s foolish heart skipped a beat.

“Do you, now? And who are you, to tell me I have need of you before I’ve asked?”

The man’s smile was the most charming, exquisite thing Hannibal had ever seen. “But you *have* asked, Your Majesty. I’ve caught word a terrible calamity has befallen the city of Balt. Young women have been disappearing without a trace. All young and fair, barely of marriageable age.”

That caught King Frederick’s attention. He tried to appear casual as he leaned on his elbow, but utterly failed at masking his interest. “Ah, yes! It’s been quite troublesome, actually. Especially because I’m in need of a wife. It wouldn’t do if all the good ones end up taken, one way or another.”

Loathsome fiend. With the king facing away from him, Hannibal didn’t bother to hide his disdain. Until his stranger met his gaze again. For a split second, Hannibal swore he saw his disdain reflected back at him in the man’s eyes. The thought sent a powerful thrill up his spine.

“So I’ve come to understand.” The man gave a grim smile.

“Who are you, anyway?” Frederick narrowed his eyes.

“You may call me Will. I have a... knack for seeing the truth of men’s hearts. And... mitigating catastrophes. I will find the one who is taking these girls, this I can promise you.”

Will. The fascinating stranger’s name was Will. Hannibal opened his mouth to introduce himself, but...

“Perhaps I do have need of you, as you say! Excellent!” King Frederick beamed, straightening his posture. “Well, you clearly know who I am, and this is my physician, Doctor Hannibal Lecter. He may be of some help to you. Er. Depending on what you find.”

Curiosity glinted in Will’s eyes as he glanced at Hannibal.

“Don’t let His Majesty’s reticence fool you. It is no secret I have made extensive studies of cadavers, in my pursuit of greater knowledge in my field.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Will said. “Once again, I apologize for my interruption. If I have your blessing, I will begin my investigation immediately.”

“Yes! Go, with my blessing!” King Frederick waved him off with an enthusiastic flourish.

“Thank you.” Will bowed. “It was good to meet you, Doctor Lecter.”

Tilting his head, Hannibal offered a warm smile. “Likewise, Will. And please, call me Hannibal.”

“Hannibal, then. Good day, Hannibal. Your Majesty.” With another quick bow, Will turned on his heel and left.

Hannibal’s heartbeat was so erratic, he thought it might give out. He hadn’t imagined Will. And yet, disappointment churned in his gut. Obligated to the king, he was in no position to follow Will, to learn more about him.

“It seems things are looking up for us, Doctor. Let us hope this man is as clever as he claims to be.”

“Indeed. Let us hope, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 2

Banquets were the sort of affairs where Hannibal usually thrived. He commanded the attention of every guest. Impressed them with the depth of his knowledge, or scandalized them with his irreverence. But he could suffer it no longer. Nothing held his interest quite like Will. Yet, for all the power and influence Hannibal wielded, still his beautiful nymph eluded him.

By the time of Doctor Abel Gideon's banquet, Hannibal was beside himself with frustration. His temper was short, his appetite low. He refused patients. None of his usual interests held his attention. Even his wife was growing concerned.

Were it not for Bedelia, he might not have come to the banquet at all. But what she'd said was true: He was an important man, and his absence would be felt. It would draw too many questions, and his reason was so absurd, he'd be a laughingstock. She refused to be at the centre of such scrutiny.

It was for her sake (or more accurately, to spare himself more of her temper) Hannibal forced himself to be civil. He engaged in the usual inane conversation. Made sure to be seen speaking to the king. Flirted with those who expected it. And in an attempt at some fun, a few who didn't. Wine was his only comfort.

Hannibal was engaged in discussion with Abel when he caught sight of Will across the room. Dressed in a simple tunic and robe, layers in varying shades of blue, no one else seemed to take notice of him. Perhaps to others, he appeared common. But to Hannibal, Will was a more than welcome vision. There was something about the way Will held himself, the way he watched the party. Absorbing every little detail.

Everything else ceased to exist. All the light had gone out of the world, and Will was a dazzling lantern in the dark. Hannibal forgot to breathe.

"... Hannibal? Doctor Lecter? Everything all right?" Abel's voice cut through Hannibal's reverie.

"Ah. Yes, quite all right, thank you Abel. I must speak to someone, if you'll excuse me." Hannibal didn't wait for Abel's reply.

He approached Will with his usual practiced, cool demeanor. Inside, he was pulled taut like a bowstring.

"It's you."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Is it?"

"You are an impossible man to find. I'd have you know, I've been very frustrated."

Will's answering laugh was absurdly warm and soft. His smile captivating. Something to be prized, when given. "Am I supposed to apologize?"

"No. But if you would make it up to me, I would have your full name."

Another smile, threaded with hesitation. "Just Will."

"Will," Hannibal repeated. The taste of his name on Hannibal's tongue was as pleasant as... well, everything else about him. "May I join you, Will?"

Will gestured to the empty seat beside him.

"No one in all of Balt seems to know who you are." Though he wanted to press close, discover every nuance of Will's scent, Hannibal maintained a respectable distance.

"It's been some time since I was last here. Probably most don't remember me. Assuming they met me in the first place."

"And what brings you to this banquet? Business, pleasure?"

There was an flicker in Will's eyes, gone too quickly for Hannibal to interpret. "Business."

"Your investigation?"

"Ugly business," Will amended. He glanced down at his wine and took a sip. His long, dark lashes cast shadows on his cheeks. Hannibal was captivated.

"And where are you staying?"

"I have a place." Will hesitated, then added, "Outside of the city."

Outside of the city? Curious. Though it explained why it had been impossible to find him in the usual places. "Anywhere I might know?"

"For someone who seems so invested in courtesy, you are being very intrusive, my Lord."

My Lord. The formal address stung. Just a little. "Of course, you're right. My apologies, dear Will. May I ask how fares your investigation?"

"I've only just begun. Nobles are... not in the habit of being forthcoming."

Hannibal's eyes crinkled with amusement. "I'm not surprised. The more rich and powerful the individual, the more lies you will find."

"Probably why they're still rich and powerful. Honesty is not very profitable."

"Certainly not. Even as a physician, I must be cautious. My diagnoses are worded very carefully, lest I upset someone's delicate sensibilities."

Will answered with a derisive snort. "Gods forbid you tell the king he's drinking too much?"

A fact the king would likely hang anyone for speaking aloud. He went to great lengths to hide any of his shortcomings - Hannibal was one of the very few privy to them all. Will proved to be as astute as he claimed, and Hannibal couldn't suppress his delight. "This work you're doing for the king. Is this the only... 'business' you do?"

"Uh. No. But. None of my business is is what you might call typical. I'm a... man of the mind. One might say I trade ideas."

As if Hannibal's interest wasn't already piqued. "A philosopher?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"And what drew you away from sitting around with other philosophers, trading ideas?"

"I... prefer to put my skills to use. So I go where I'm needed," Will said. "A traveling philosopher."

"So tell me, Will. If you are a man of reason, why warn me of incurring the wrath of the gods?"

Will glanced away, to the guests. "Just because I'm a man of reason doesn't mean I don't believe in the gods."

The barest hint of a smile crinkled Hannibal's eyes. "Is that not precisely what that means?"

"I do believe in them. I also know they aren't as powerful as they would have mortals think."

"Which is to say?"

"Well... the sun rises with or without the goddess Alannah. The chariot drives itself, so to speak."

"Ah, so there is your philosophical 'reason'." Hannibal shifted toward Will until their knees touched. "You say it is reasonable for one to believe in the gods, but not to believe they are solely responsible for the sunrise. Is this also for the change of seasons? Whether a harvest is bountiful or barren?"

"Mm. Alannah may have the *ability* to hasten the sun's advance across the sky, or scorch the earth with its heat." Will leaned in, engaged. "But the gods are not infallible. Most of the time, Alannah doesn't concern herself with the sun at all, and yet the sun doesn't die. She has other things that are far more important to her."

"Perhaps you should be careful what you say, dear Will. Your words sound dangerously close to sacrilege."

"I don't fear the gods' wrath."

"And yet I should?"

Will's answering smile had a touch of self-deprecation. "... I will say only that I wouldn't recommend it. And anyway, I only speak the truth."

Remarkable boy. "You seem to know much more of the gods than most."

"Unfortunately."

"Tell me, then. If the gods do not move the world, what purpose do they serve?"

It seemed to be the right question to capture Will's interest. He leaned closer, a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. "One might describe them more as caretakers. Charged with keeping the world in balance. Although you might guess, they often fail in their duty."

"Such as when the god of compassion shows none for a child who has lost his family in the cruelest circumstances."

Tension worked Will's jaw, and he stared down into his empty goblet. "Yes. Just as a god's power is unmatched by any mortal, so too is his selfishness."

"I thought selfishness was one of the great mortal sins." A sin Hannibal indulged in often. Among others.

"So it is. But the gods are not exempt from temptation and sin."

"More sacrilege?"

"Consider this: the gods have eternity. They hold grudges longer, covet more deeply. Envy with greater intensity. This is why Alannah neglects her duty."

"I do not recall any stories of the sun goddess being prone to such things as envy."

"Not envy, no. But she is also the goddess of love, and she is very prone to its influence. Her love for the goddess of the moon is unmatched."

"It is good, then, that you say she is not bound by her duty to the sun."

Will's expression softened. "What a sad tale that would be, that the sun and moon could never meet."

"That is the tale I've always heard." Hannibal smiled.

A laugh. "Mortals tend to spin the tales however they wish. But I'm telling you, neither Alannah nor Margot would suffer such a fate. They would sooner rearrange the stars."

"That makes for a much better tale, indeed." Hannibal edged close enough to see the mutability in Will's eyes. Blue, green, grey. Utterly stunning. "Tell me, Will, is there anyone for whom you would rearrange the stars?"

"No. But sometimes I think about rearranging them anyway."

It was Hannibal's turn to laugh. "That would certainly get the gods' attention."

"Heh. That it would."

Resting a hand on Will's knee, Hannibal leaned in to speak in his ear. "You have my attention, now."

The most delightful flush coloured Will's cheeks. He tensed, but did not move away. "Are you implying your attention is equal to that of a god?"

"It is at least as rare."

"You're a little arrogant, aren't you." And yet, Will tilted his head, leaning it against Hannibal's.

"Please, Will. Tell me where I can reach you. I wish to spend more time with you, away from the prying eyes of others."

"Alone."

"Yes."

"I..." Will sighed. "Letting anyone know where I am puts my investigation at risk. I can't compromise that, Hannibal."

"Am I under suspicion?"

Will met Hannibal's eyes with a staggering intensity. "Is there a reason you should be?"

"I'm not stealing away young women, if that is what you're asking."

"Still, I can't." Something across the room caught Will's eye. "I-I have to go. But. Thank you for speaking with me. It was... interesting."

Defeated, Hannibal grasped Will's hand as he rose. "More interesting than any conversation I've had in... a very long time. I do hope we'll see each other again soon, dear Will."

"Good evening, Hannibal." He lingered a moment, with their hands clasped together. As though he wanted to say something more. But then he stepped away, and Hannibal lost track of him in the tumult of the party.

For the rest of the evening, Hannibal could think only of Will, and how much he wanted to see him again. How desperate he was to know him. It was like a growing hunger in the pit of his stomach, and it threatened to consume him entirely.

If Will refused to tell him where he was, Hannibal would have to draw him out. A change in tactics was required. Large social gatherings seemed relevant to Will's investigation. Therefore, it was time for Hannibal to hold one of his own. Fortunately, it wasn't difficult to convince Bedelia. It had been some time since they'd hosted, and she was eager for the diversion.

Banquets at the Lecter-du Maurier household were always grand affairs. Their house was one of the largest in the city, perhaps second only to the royal palace. The main courtyard, the garden, the public rooms and pavilions, were all packed with people.

Once, Hannibal would have swelled with pride at his success. Now all he cared about was seeing Will again. Despite the crowd, however, Will was nowhere to be found. The party had been going for hours.

Bedelia found Hannibal in a small courtyard. He had chased out the few guests who mingled there, so he could take a moment to despair in peace. She leaned against the moon gate which framed one side of the courtyard, a goblet of wine in her hand.

"You're obsessed," Bedelia said.

"I'm intrigued."

"Obsessively. This could cost you your reputation." Only 'your' sounded a whole lot more like 'my'.

Hannibal approached her, shoulders squared and spine straight. "If you are so concerned, should you not be entertaining our guests?"

Bedelia shrugged. "People are already talking, Hannibal. To say your behaviour has been worrisome is an understatement."

"Worrisome in that people have noticed my mind has been otherwise occupied? What educated man has not found himself occupied by some interest or another?"

"This is not like that, Hannibal. And it's only going to get worse. Frederica has already taken the opportunity to sensationalize your madness for her own amusement."

"And I'm certain you've done your best to circumvent her efforts."

"I cannot presume to control her. I'm not her mother, nor her keeper."

"No, you are certainly not." There was an edge in Hannibal's tone. It seemed that to Bedelia, their reputation only mattered if Hannibal was the one who risked it.

Bedelia was unmoved. "Return to the banquet, Hannibal. I realize you're determined to bring our house to ruin, but it won't be tonight."

"Very well, Bedelia dear. For your sake. But Frederica is your responsibility, not mine. If you wish to save this house, you will find a way to keep her tongue otherwise occupied."

“There is no need to be vulgar,” Bedelia said.

As the evening wore on, the banquet only grew more suffocating. Being around the richest, and most powerful of Balt was like lying in a viper’s nest. Each and every one of them a serpent. Just waiting for the right vulnerability, the right opportunity to strike.

One such serpent kept hovering at Hannibal’s shoulder. Though Franklyn served the king, he had recently developed a tiresome fixation on him. Hannibal never imagined preventing someone from choking to death could turn out to be such a bother.

“Wonderful banquet, Doctor Lecter, just wonderful!” Franklyn grinned, far too wide and genuine to be considered anything but foolish. Not a serpent, Hannibal thought, but a rat. Every bit as devious, but far too impulsive and eager. An easy meal for any snake.

“Of course it is,” Hannibal said.

“I’m going to host a banquet soon, you know. I’ll be hiring the services of the Hobbs family for catering, just like you, right? They serve the best game, don’t they? Everyone says they do.”

Hannibal barely suppressed his sneer. “Yes. Naturally, one must hire the best.”

“You’ll come, won’t you?”

“I will have to check with my wife. She tends to be the one who maintains our social calendar.”

Franklyn gave a sage nod, as though they were very good friends conspiring together. “Yes, naturally.” Shooting another grin, he clapped Hannibal on the back. “Have you tried the cheese yet? It’s delicious.”

Fingers curling into a fist, Hannibal gave Franklyn a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m sure it is.” And then, he spotted a saviour in the form of Doctor Abel Gideon. “Ah. If you’ll excuse me, Franklyn, I have something I need to discuss with a colleague.”

Before Franklyn could utter another word, Hannibal caught Abel’s attention and made his way toward him.

“You seem in an awful hurry, Doctor Lecter. Something important?”

“Only the desperate desire to extricate myself from a most tedious individual.”

Abel glanced at Franklyn and flashed a knowing smile. “Tedious doesn’t seem strong enough a word. Did he ask you about the cheese?”

“Please, Abel. I wish to avoid tedium, not reiterate it.”

“I saw your friend at the last party. Will, was it? He looked positively spooked.”

Hannibal’s mouth quirked. Abel did so love poking at sore spots. Unlike Franklyn, he was most certainly a snake. “Did he? I can’t imagine why.”

“Well I can’t presume to know, of course, but I do recall seeing you all by yourself, watching him leave.”

“I’m curious to know what it is you’re implying, Abel.”

“Oh, nothing at all. I just think it would be a shame if there was to be an incident that might humiliate or discredit you in some way.”

Fingers twitching, Hannibal folded his hands behind his back. Lest he do something foolish (and wouldn’t Abel just love that?). “It seems to me that you are overstepping your station, Abel. I do hope you were not intending to threaten me.”

“Aw. Don’t be mad at me. I’m just looking out for you, Hannibal. As a fellow physician.”

“You would be wise to look elsewhere. If you allow yourself to be thus distracted, you might miss something truly important.” *Such as the knife in your belly*, Hannibal thought.

Abel’s smile grew teeth. “Well. It’s always nice speaking with you, Doctor Lecter. Great party.” And with that, Abel excused himself.

Hannibal was at the end of his patience. If Will wasn’t here, there was no point. Why should he suffer through more banal conversations and thinly veiled threats? He was on the threshold of a dramatic fit, prepared to send everyone away. Until he caught sight of the man who wasn’t on his guest list.

Dressed in the same clothing he’d worn at the last banquet, Will was as lovely as ever. He found himself a goblet of wine and wandered across the winding bridge which lead to the sunset pavilion. Hannibal mustered every ounce of self-control to keep himself from running after him. He had to at least try to maintain the last shreds of his dignity.

He followed at Will’s pace, catching up when Will sat on a bench. It wasn’t as private as Hannibal hoped, but the few guests gathered there had come to enjoy the view of the setting sun. They wouldn’t be paying attention to a couple of people on a bench, even if one of them was Hannibal.

The bubbling sounds of koi splashing in the pond drifted up through the window as Hannibal approached.

“You came,” Hannibal said, unable to keep the eagerness from his voice.

Will quirked an eyebrow, though he didn’t appear surprised. “You hoped I would?”

“It’s the only reason I threw this party.” Hannibal sat on the bench. This time, he felt no need to leave a respectable distance between them. Heat seared the places where they touched - shoulder, hip, thigh.

A smile played on Will’s lips. “But I wasn’t invited.”

“Had I known where to send an invitation, I would have. And anyway, you came.”

The smile faltered, and Will’s gaze skipped away. “Your wife doesn’t seem to be happy I’m here, as you are.”

“Why do you say that?”

Will gestured to where Bedelia stood. The sunset was still bright enough to shine through the round viewing window directly behind her, making her a silhouette with a golden aura. Hannibal was able to make out the taut line of her jaw before she returned to watching the horizon.

“Ah. Yes. I suppose she isn’t. She believes I’m obsessed.”

“With me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you?”

“Yes.” Hannibal leaned in, nose brushing along the side of Will’s face. Gods, he smelled delightful. “Terribly. You occupy most of my thoughts. Possibly all of them.”

Will’s cheeks turned pink. “I h-hardly warrant... That is. I’m of no importance.”

“You are to me. I long to know you better. I want to spend every waking hour hearing more of your thoughts on the gods. People. Everything.”

“You really shouldn’t.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“It’s... complicated. Not safe for you.”

Hannibal frowned. “Does that mean it’s not safe for you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me. Perhaps I can help you.”

“No, you can’t.” Will held a hand up before Hannibal could protest. “And I have no choice. I’ve told you, I go where I’m needed. I do what I must.”

Curling his hand around Will’s fingers, Hannibal brought them to his lips. “As a man of reason, do you not believe in free will?”

Will stared at Hannibal's mouth. "For mortals, yes."

"That is a curious way to put it."

"I do believe in free will." Will sighed and pulled his fingers away. "But as I said, it's complicated. Please, just... Let this be."

"As you wish, dear Will." Somewhere in the garden, a peacock screeched. Laughter bubbled up from the other guests. One of them screeched back. The imbecile. Hannibal stood and held his arm out to Will, inviting him to walk. "Does your investigation bring you here tonight, then?"

"Mm. It won't be long now." Will rose and looped his arm with Hannibal's. They walked toward the pagoda at the back corner of the garden. A place not open to guests.

"For?"

"The culprit will make himself known."

"You know who he is." Though Will didn't respond, his expression confirmed Hannibal's guess.

"It won't be tonight, your party is safe." Will's mouth curved up at a twitch in Hannibal's eyes. "Disappointed?"

"These affairs are often very dull. Keeping up appearances can be so tiresome. Discovering a kidnapper in our midst could make for an entertaining evening."

"It's much worse than that."

"How much worse?"

"Enough that your party would be remembered for disturbing reasons."

Which meant, as Hannibal suspected, the girls would not be found alive. "Perhaps they all deserve to be a little disturbed."

"They will be, soon enough. Best to let everyone enjoy themselves while they can."

"Tell me, then. What do you expect to find, when you expose this criminal?"

Furrowing his brow, Will reached out and cupped Hannibal's cheek. "Why must you know? Why do you always insist on digging further into the darkness? You have so much light around you. So much potential."

Hannibal frowned back. "What do you mean?"

Something vague flickered in Will's expression. "'A child who has lost his family in the cruelest circumstances.' You have the power to leave all that behind, Hannibal. Let it go, and become something better."

They stopped in the middle of the path, framed on either side by stalks of bamboo. Fireflies flickered over the path ahead. Hannibal pulled away, and glared. “What do you know of what I’ve left behind?”

“I know you haven’t. You carry it on your back; I can see it plain as day.”

“And what of the things you carry? Have you left everything behind?”

Will sighed and reached for Hannibal’s hand. “The gods saw fit to spare you, Hannibal. Can’t you see your life for the gift it is?”

“How can you say my life is a gift, knowing I lost everything?”

“Look around you, Hannibal. What you’ve gained since. What you’ve built. Your garden. Each tree, every structure. All of it your design, to create perfect harmony. There is a design in all the universe, too. Where there is death, there is also life. The decaying leaves feed the soil. A rotting carcass feeds the insects. Don’t you find that beautiful?”

Beautiful. Hannibal’s heart thudded in his chest. “Do I find beauty in the way the cycles of life and death feed upon each other? How growth naturally passes into decay, only to beget new growth?” They continued walking again, hand in hand. He looked up at the sky, now purple and red. He could just make out the first stars of the evening. “The gravity of it has been a constant fixation, for as long as I can remember. How might one be reborn, how might one find oneself transformed through the experience of utter obliteration?”

“And so you would dash yourself to pieces to find out?”

“Not myself. Not without knowing how I might... retain enough of myself to understand.”

“What you suggest is hubris.”

“What is it you think I’m suggesting?”

Will looked at their hands, contemplative. “A transformation you aren’t meant to suffer.”

“Is it suffering, to understand the universe better? To uncover its secrets?”

“All knowledge is suffering.”

They reached the pagoda, and stopped at the door. Will studied the pattern of carvings around the frame, tracing a fingertip along the iron handle made to look like a dog’s head. A symbol of the god of knowledge.

“Will,” Hannibal said. “Won’t you accept my hospitality, tonight? Stay with me.”

“I can’t.”

Hannibal pulled Will close, burying his face into Will’s hair. “I could have a room prepared for you.”

“A room?” Will asked, muffled against Hannibal’s shoulder. “Not good enough for your bed, am I?”

“I don’t think my wife would appreciate hearing the sounds I intend to draw from you.”

A blush darkened Will’s cheeks. “Ah. Right. I--”

Hannibal gently grabbed Will by the chin, and kissed him. Tender and chaste, but filled with promise. “Won’t you at least consider it?”

Will twisted out of Hannibal’s grip, refusing to meet his gaze. “Whatever I consider doesn’t matter. I just. I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“At least tell me why not?”

“Can’t it be good enough that I told you it isn’t safe?”

“I would prefer to decide which risks I might take for myself.” Hannibal reached for Will’s arm, but Will stepped back.

“You can’t even begin to understand the risks, Hannibal. Please just. Allow me to ask you this one thing.”

“You ask too much. You’ve bewitched me, Will. I can’t help but be curious.”

“Then I’m going to have to disappoint you. I... I’m sorry. For what it’s worth, I enjoyed your company tonight.”

“Will--”

But Will was gone. Hannibal followed the path, but found Bedelia instead. She had noticed their absence and came to interfere.

“So he came after all. The object of your obsession.”

Damnably woman. Never satisfied to let Hannibal be. No doubt she was concerned her position in Hannibal house was growing more precarious.

“He did.” Hannibal tried to step past her, but she blocked him again. “Did you see him pass?”

“Have you discovered anything more about who he is?”

The king hadn’t announced Will’s intentions, and Will himself was so secretive. It would likely be unwise to risk revealing Will’s investigation. “Nothing beyond that he’s a traveling philosopher.”

Bedelia’s mouth quirked. “Then you don’t know him.”

“I’m curious about him. About his ideas.”

“Ideas can be dangerous.”

“He’s not a revolutionary, Bedelia. You have nothing to fear from him. Or me.”

“For now.” She crossed her arms. “Be careful, Hannibal. This man comes from nowhere, and everyone can see you are obsessed. He may take advantage.”

“Your warning is duly noted, Bedelia dear. Now please, allow me to pass.”

It was clear she wasn’t satisfied, but she nodded and stepped aside. “Be sure to see the king off, Hannibal. He’s getting ready to leave.”

Small mercies. If the king was leaving, it meant the rest of the guests would soon follow. But Will, of course, cared nothing for protocols and social expectations. He’d simply left.

At last, however, all the guests had gone as well, and Hannibal drowned his disappointment with the rest of the wine.

The following morning found Hannibal rather... cranky. Too much wine, not enough Will. He spent the early hours wandering the garden, trying to clear his head. Staring at the pond, contemplating flowers. Unable to eat. Really, it could only have been described as pining.

His appetite returned somewhat by lunchtime, however, and so he had to brave the main house in search of food. He found lunch arranged in the main courtyard, spread over a linen blanket. Unfortunately, so were Bedelia and Frederica.

“Heard your favourite dream boat showed up last night. So you didn’t make him up, huh?” Frederica smirked up at Hannibal as he sat at the far corner of the blanket.

“It would appear not. And I heard that you, dear Frederica, had a very lucrative evening. An invitation to the king’s next banquet, all your own.”

Flashing a grin, she bit into a nectarine and let the juice dribble down her chin. “Not just a plus one this time.”

“I was told that our invitation still stands as well,” Bedelia said. There was a measure of disgust in her tone, insulted that the king saw fit to reassure her.

Hannibal couldn’t help smiling. “Ah, I do hope you gave him our thanks.”

“Of course.” Because she had to.

“I think I will to go into the country, today. Would anyone care to join me?” He only asked because he knew both women hated the country, and therefore would not join him.

Frederica wrinkled her nose. “Ew. No thanks, lunatic. I don’t get why anyone would ever go out there. It’s so... rustic. And. Out there, no one can hear you scream.”

Hannibal flashed a wicked smile. “That may be so, but in the city, no one will come to help.”

“You're such a pig.” Frederica shifted closer to Bedelia.

“I assure you, Frederica. When the time comes for all of us to be called to slaughter, I will not be in the pen.”

Just as Frederica opened her mouth to retort, Bedelia interrupted. “I too must decline with my regrets, dear husband.” There wasn't the barest hint of regret in her voice. “I have appointments to keep.”

“Perhaps another time, then. If you've no need of me, I shall take my leave.”

“No, we definitely don't need you.” Frederica gave him a sweet smile, though there was still a hint tension around her mouth. At Hannibal's warning look, she quickly amended, “I mean, we'll be fine on our own. Appointments to keep and all that.”

Hannibal let it pass. He certainly didn't need them, either. “Then I bid you both a good day. I will likely not return until tomorrow.”

With a full belly, Hannibal felt marginally better. And more hopeful. If Will was nowhere to be found in the city, there were only so many places he could hide in the surrounding farms and villages. He left Bedelia and Frederica to their nonsense and headed for the stables.

Chapter 2.5 (Interlude)

Chapter Summary

A glimpse into the mythology of the RtS 'verse.

Chapter Notes

My apologies for yet another delay. This fic is just. So much bigger than I originally conceived, so I wrote up this little mythological interlude to give myself another week to fix up the next chapter. I hope y'all enjoy! <3

(As a sidenote, I've updated the tags to reflect a few things that aren't coming up for a long while, but I think it should be noted just in case it's not your bag and you've been reading this ehehe. Sorry!)

The god Vilhelmus is one of the kindest of all the gods. Though he values truth and knowledge above all else, his heart is also filled with compassion and empathy. It is because he can see into the hearts of mortals, he cannot ignore their senseless suffering. There are many stories of Vilhelmus being so moved by a mortal's plight, he can't help but intervene.

When Bev, the goddess of war, sent the people of Balt into battle, it was Vilhelmus who found the hero Georgia and bestowed upon her a magical comb, and his mighty ravenstag. With Vilhelmus' blessings, Georgia rode bravely onto the battlefield and ended the conflict.

When the god of chaos tried to destroy the world, it was Vilhelmus himself, in his canine dragon form, who vanquished Mason's terrifying beast, Randall the World-eater. Although he was very nearly consumed by the beast himself, and still bears the scars from the battle.

And not all who live on earth are pure of heart and purpose, either. There are also those who are cruel and selfish. They take advantage of those weaker than them, beat them down, toss them aside. They do not earn Vilhelmus' kind regard. Rather, it is those pitiful creatures, the small ones who cannot help themselves, who have the depth of Vilhelmus' love. But even a god cannot save everyone, and so there is still much suffering among mortals, whether by the gods' design or their own.

There is another tale, not so grand as stopping a war, nor so impressive as vanquishing a beast. It is a story about one of those broken creatures for whom Vilhelmus' heart bleeds.

One night, in the middle of the bloodiest war mortals had ever known, Vilhelmus wandered a field of corpses. He had been tasked with delivering an epiphany to the king of the nation, but found himself distracted by the pain of the fallen soldiers who still clung to life. Vilhelmus sought to end their suffering and usher their souls to heaven.

Screams across the field drew his attention. Sounds of torture and death. As he drew near, he saw soldiers looting two bodies on the ground. Nearby two children sat, clinging to each other, sobbing. A boy and his little sister.

Irritated by the children's crying, one of the soldiers snapped at them to be quiet. But they were only children. They were terrified and grieving the deaths of their parents. They could not stop. The soldier grew angry. He shouted nasty curses and hit the boy with the hilt of his sword. At the sight of her brother's bloodied form on the ground, the girl let out a blood curdling shriek. The soldier cut her down without mercy.

Vilhelmus was beside himself with rage for what the soldiers had done. He ached for this boy, and all that he had lost. All that was taken from him. The soldiers were not merely fighting a war, they delighted in the chaos and violence. Vilhelmus discovered a new thirst - vengeance.

Before they could kill the boy as well, Vilhelmus unleashed his fury. He tore the soldiers apart, scattering the pieces across the battlefield. He made certain their souls would not reach heaven.

The boy was frightened, but unharmed. For hours, Vilhelmus held the boy through his grief. He felt it deeply, as though the grief was his own. As though they were conjoined. When the boy had calmed enough to fall asleep, Vilhelmus returned to heaven.

Kade, the leader of the gods and Queen Mother of heaven, was displeased.

Not only had Vilhelmus interfered again, but he'd also neglected his own duty. Due to his failure, the wrong side had won the advantage in the war and set all the gods' plans into disarray.

A battle erupted in heaven. The gods had expected favours and gifts, new lands to dominate and people to worship them. Vilhelmus' compassion for one boy had ruined it all.

And so Vilhelmus was cast out of heaven. If he loved the mortals so dearly, Kade thought, then surely he could stand to live among them, or else spend the rest of his days in the underworld.

It was then that Jaak saw an opportunity. Jaak maintains order in the world for both mortals and gods. And it was he who was charged with setting things right again when the war was over. But unlike Vilhelmus, Jaak does not have the ability to see so clearly into the hearts of mortals. How much easier would it be to restore peace if he could weed out those with ill intentions?

Appealing to Vilhelmus' compassion and love for mortals, Jaak convinced him to help. And he promised that when the time was right, when Kade was no longer so angry, he would beg

her forgiveness on Vilhelmus' behalf, so he could return to heaven.

But such a time has not yet come. For now, Vilhelmus is still banished. Unable to walk the beautiful meadows and mountains and gardens of heaven. So on earth he remains, an extension of Jaak's will, until the day the gates of heaven are open to him once more.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I was all excited that this is actually ready for Tuesday, and then I realized I probably won't be able to keep this posting schedule because I have a class on Monday nights now. So. Aiming for Wednesdays maybe? XD

If it had been a simple case of touring the countryside, Hannibal would have made an occasion of it. Ordered a carriage, invited a few companions to sample some local wines and cheeses.

But this was no pleasure jaunt. Hannibal had a mission. In the stables, he selected his finest, sturdiest horse - a willful, chestnut beauty named Homer. He rode out alone, armed with only a dagger and a cask of water.

Heading east, his progression through the countryside was slow. Still recovering from the previous night's overindulgence, he only managed to make it a few miles out. A few farms, a vineyard, and a sad little village. There was no sign of Will, but he wouldn't allow himself to be so easily discouraged. His Will was too clever to be found so easily. What he needed now was a decent dinner and a good night's rest.

The next morning found Hannibal in higher spirits. He covered more ground, riding all the way south and most of the way to the west. His search, however, was rather unproductive. His dear Will remained as elusive as ever.

What he did uncover was a curious phenomenon. Specific details about Will proved slippery. As with Freddie's inquiries, people had only vague recollections - someone calling Hannibal out, Hannibal speaking with someone during the banquet. Nothing that gave Hannibal definitive answers. As though there was a void in their memory where Will should be.

It made Hannibal that much more determined to find him.

By the evening, both he and Homer were exhausted. Eventually, he came upon an inn just outside the village of Wolf Trap. A village aptly named, as it was believed to be the place where the god Vilhelmus first domesticated the wolf. Though he would have liked to explore the village itself, the hour was late and he was tired.

The tavern was mostly empty. A young man stood behind the counter, and Hannibal could only presume he was the innkeeper. Though with his shorn hair and cocky posture, he looked more like the sort of man one wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. A thug.

Hannibal caught the man's eye. "I'd like a room for the evening, please."

The young man smirked. "Are you expecting any guests, or is it just yourself?"

"Just myself, thank you."

The man took a key from one of the small drawers along the back wall and beckoned for Hannibal to follow him. The stairs creaked slightly as they headed up to the second floor and entered a narrow hallway with six or seven guest rooms. Stopping, the man unlocked the second door on the left and waited for Hannibal to have a look inside.

The room was bleak and contained the bare essentials in terms of furnishing. A simple bed made up of a thin mattress on a wooden frame. A threadbare blanket and pillow were neatly placed at its foot. It wasn't what he was used to, but he couldn't be picky. He had no idea how far away a nobler tavern might be, and poor Homer was in no condition to continue. Neither was he, if he was being honest.

"Is it to your liking, my Lord?" The emphasis placed on 'Lord' sounded more like an insult than an honorific.

Hannibal shot him a sideways glance as he took the key. "This will do fine, thank you." The man turned to leave, but paused at the door when Hannibal added, "Ah, pardon me, but might you know of a man by the name of Will?"

The man tilted his head. "Why are you looking for him?"

A thread of hope caused Hannibal's heart to skip a beat. "I wish only to speak with him. To know where he's staying, so I might send a letter or an invitation."

"Ah, I see. Well, sorry. Can't say that I know anyone by that name."

It was difficult to pin down, but something about the man's expression, something in his tone, set Hannibal on edge. "He may be using another name. Perhaps if I describe him...?"

The man bid Hannibal to continue with a wave of his hand.

"You would certainly know him to see him. I daresay his beauty rivals descriptions of the god Brion himself. His eyes are a blue so striking, the scales of butterfly wings can hardly mimic the brilliance of their hue. Dark hair, finer than any silk, falling in exquisite curls around the harsh, yet graceful, angles of his face. Lips pink as peonies, perfectly shaped as a bow, with a smile that--"

"He sounds like quite the catch." The man flashed a peculiar smile, either unaware or unconcerned that he'd interrupted Hannibal.

"If only I could catch him."

The man's smile widened. "I've heard of you."

"Oh?"

“You’re Doctor Lecter. Physician to the king!” His exaggerated tone and gesture left no doubt his intention was to ridicule.

Hannibal’s upper lip twitched. “Among other things.”

“Known for his cold detachment, lately obsessed with a mysterious stranger.”

“My apologies, but I don’t think I’ve heard of you.”

“The name’s Matthew Brown. At your service.” He bowed with a flourish. At Hannibal’s silence, he added, “And no one of significance to you. But you, on the other hand. You’re a man of some significance. Word has it you’re losing your mind.”

Hannibal narrowed his eyes. “Do I seem like I’ve lost my mind?”

“You seem... dedicated to your purpose. You just don’t give up easy, am I right?” Matthew tilted his head again, as though sizing Hannibal up. “Care for a drink?”

“I suppose I am a little thirsty.”

Matthew beckoned again for Hannibal to follow, then continued, “I admire a man with that kind of conviction. Makes him reliable. It sets one at ease, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” Hannibal said.

In their brief absence, the tavern had filled with patrons. The villagers had finished their work for the day, so it was time for drinks and relaxation. Unfortunately, it seemed the villagers’ idea of relaxing was to be as loud and boisterous as possible. By the time Hannibal was seated by the fireplace, there were no other tables left.

“Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back with some wine. The best we’ve got.” Matthew patted his shoulder, and left.

The familiar gesture set Hannibal’s teeth on edge, but he was too absurdly tired to do anything about it. A drink and some rest would certainly do him some good. What a waste it would be if he exhausted himself with nothing to show for it. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, going over his plans for the next day in his mind.

The front door opened with a loud creak. The scent of jasmine wafted in on a gentle breeze. The room fell quiet. As the door closed with a soft click, Hannibal couldn’t help turning around, curious to see who had caused such an awed hush through the room.

A stunning woman stood at the door, surveying the room. She exuded an elegance beyond anything Bedelia or Frederica could have dreamed of achieving. Her dark hair was bound up in several knots and tastefully ornamented with gold and ruby pins. Her painted red lips were in stark contrast with her pale skin. Her body was draped in brilliant red and gold silks, finer than anything Hannibal had ever seen, a phoenix emblazoned on her chest. She looked fit to be an empress. If she had hoped to find a quiet place to rest, she was certainly in the wrong place. Or perhaps she didn’t know how to be subdued.

All at once a fervent enthusiasm overtook the room. Patrons approached the woman with unrestrained joy. She responded with warmth and kindness, touching cheeks and shoulders, listening to each person as one might to a dear friend. She possessed such grace, such incredible patience, Hannibal found himself similarly enchanted.

Caught up in watching the woman, Hannibal startled when Matthew returned with a goblet of wine and a steamed pork bun.

“Sorry for the wait, my Lord. I hope the wine is to your satisfaction.”

Hannibal didn't look away from the woman as he nodded. “I'm sure it is passable. Thank you, Mister Brown.”

Matthew bowed and left Hannibal to his drink.

The woman made her way around the room, stopping at each table as though she was hosting a grand party. And as she went, each person looked as though they'd been blessed. Almost euphoric. It seemed she was known to them, and very well-loved. Not a guest, then, but a local? But she possessed such finery, Hannibal wondered why he'd never seen her in the city before. Then again, there were some nobles who left their families at home when they had business in town. Nonetheless, it was still curious.

When she finished speaking with the last patron, she glanced at Hannibal with a gentle smile. Though he hadn't indicated any desire to speak with her, she approached him as she had everyone else.

“Does the evening find you well, my Lord?” Up close, Hannibal saw her eyes were a striking shade of azure. Like the sky on a clear day. Her smile was pleasantly warm.

Hannibal sipped his wine. “Well enough. And you, my Lady?”

“Well enough. Might I join you for a little while? Yours is the only table with space left to sit.”

“Please do. Would you like some wine?”

The woman's smile crinkled the corners of her eyes. “I appreciate beer more than wine, but thank you. I won't be long, just resting my weary feet.”

“A beer, then.” He caught Matthew's eye and waved him over. “Beer for the lady, if you please.” Then, to the woman, “If you were my guest, I would offer you a compromise. Beer brewed in a wine barrel. Two years. I bottled it myself.”

“That's some compromise. I'm almost curious to try it.”

“Perhaps you might come to my next banquet. I'll set some aside especially for you.”

Matthew returned with a mug of beer. She accepted it with a gracious nod “Do you often make a habit of inviting strangers to your home?”

“Not often, no. Only the most charming ones.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind if I brought my wife along?”

Ah. That explained why he hadn’t seen her in King Frederick’s court. “Not at all. Does she also favour beer?”

“No, she’s more of a wine drinker.”

“She’s in luck. I have plenty of wine, as well. Though not all of it bottled myself.”

“What else do you do? Chef? Architect?”

Hannibal let out a soft laugh. “Ah, nothing so creative, I’m afraid. I’m a physician.”

“Physicians need to be creative too sometimes, don’t they? Strange illnesses, mysterious diseases... It requires a bit of innovation.”

“I suppose there is the occasional opportunity for discovery. It’s somehow less satisfying when no one else is able to appreciate it, however.”

“No other physician friends?”

“Alas, they are not so inclined toward creativity. They prefer the familiarity of their texts, and what they believe to be absolute facts.”

“Maybe that just means you have something to teach them.”

“That would require them to listen.” And stop fearing the gods like the imbeciles they were, Hannibal thought. “What about you? Chef? Architect? Physician, perhaps?”

The woman tilted her head, considering her answer. “Something closer to physician, I suppose. I have a knack for healing. You know, I have a friend who does that, too.”

“What? Heal people?”

She laughed. “Flirtatiously change the subject.”

“Only in the interest of getting to know my table companion a little better.” Hannibal winked.

“Fair enough.”

They sat in silence for a while, both of them pretending to watch the fire. Hannibal sipped his wine and ate his bun, idly wondering if there were more charming and fascinating people hiding in other villages. And how had he never met them before now?

“You seem troubled.” The woman’s voice was imbued with sympathy. It didn’t needle Hannibal the way it would with someone else.

“Mm.” Hannibal leaned back in his chair, frowning into his cup. “I am searching for someone. And I have been faced with obstacles at every turn.”

“Sounds like whoever it is doesn’t want to be found.”

Hannibal sighed. “No, I don’t believe he does.”

The woman pressed her lips together. “Yet you search for him anyway?”

“I believe his reasons for not wanting to be found are... superfluous. He claims it is dangerous for me to be close to him.”

“Maybe it is.”

“Even if it is, I can’t find it in myself to be concerned. And besides, should he not allow me to make such decisions for myself?”

Fire danced and flickered in the woman’s eyes. For a moment, Hannibal thought the flames came from within her, until he realized it was only the reflection from the fireplace. Perhaps he was more tired than he thought.

Leaning her elbow on the table, the woman rested her chin in her hand. “One might argue you should also respect his wishes.”

She had a point. Of course she had a point. But it was not one Hannibal liked one bit. He scrubbed a hand over his face, as though it might help stave off the spectre of sleep.

“I must admit, I’m not feeling particularly magnanimous in this regard.”

“That sounds a bit like love. A selfish kind of love, but love nonetheless.”

“Love is selfish, is it not? Born of our desire for companionship. To find someone who understands us, to ease the dull ache of loneliness.”

This she seemed to understand. Her expression softened. “You’re likely to get hurt, you know.”

Hannibal made a sound of agreement, and finished his wine. His exhaustion was finally catching up with him. Limbs heavy, and eyes lidding, he stifled a yawn. “I must apologize, my Lady, but I am... very tired. If I might excuse myself...?”

“Don’t let me keep you.” The woman frowned as Hannibal wobbled on his feet. “Are you all right?”

“Fine, yes. Perfectly fine. Good night, my Lady. It was a pleasure to have your company.”

“May your dreams be sweet, my Lord.”

Chapter 4

Hannibal regained consciousness with some difficulty. His mind was sluggish with whatever drugs still coursed through his veins. He was suspended by a rope around his neck, barely balanced on a bucket. Cold air prickled over his bare skin. His arms were bound to a wooden pole, throbbing with pain.

A single torch did little to illuminate the room. He could at least tell he was in a storehouse of some kind. Barrels lined the nearest wall, and he caught the musty odor of spilled wine and beer.

He glanced down. Blood dripped from his arms, sliced from the middle of his forearm down to his wrist. A wave of nausea set him off balance. He wobbled. His foot slipped. The rope strained against his throat, and he scrambled his feet back up.

“I’ve been to one of your lectures on anatomy. You’re a very knowledgeable man.” Matthew Brown’s voice came from somewhere in the shadows. “You’ve got some very controversial ideas about the human body.”

Hannibal struggled to stay upright, straining to find Matthew in the dark.

“There were whispers in the crowd that you’re some kind of monster. Desecrating bodies in the name of science. Defying the gods.”

Though every part of Hannibal’s body burned and ached, his heart remained steady. He was not afraid. Merely curious to see what Matthew planned to do.

“You want to know what I think?” The torch flickered, illuminating Matthew’s predatory smile as he stepped into the light. Half of his face was cast in deep shadow. “No one ever made any progress without eviscerating a few corpses.”

“I must be very close to enlightenment, then.” Against Hannibal’s throat, the rope weakened his voice.

Matthew came closer. The light seemed to catch on something deep in Matthew’s eyes, they almost appeared red. “Did you know that the phrase ‘to kick the bucket’ came from exactly this situation? You could kick it away now yourself and it’d all be over. Quicker than bleeding out.” He slowly began to pace from one side of the room to the other. There was something sinister in the way he moved. “It’s a choice. Life is all about choices. Good choices. Bad choices.”

“... You know Will.”

“We have a mutual respect.” The knife in Matthew’s hand glinted in the light. Hannibal’s blood still dripped from the blade. “But you see, I’ve *earned* that respect. Him and me, we understand each other.”

“I doubt that.”

Enraged, Matthew lunged, his knife stopping short of Hannibal’s throat. The tip of the blade dug into Hannibal’s flesh. “What you think doesn’t matter one fucking bit, anyway. You’re nothing.”

Hannibal closed his eyes. He leaned his body against Matthew’s for stability, pressing the knife a little deeper. Trading one pain for another.

“If I’m nothing,” Hannibal rasped, “then why bother with me?”

Matthew stepped back and took a deep breath, his anger under control once more. “He said you’re *interesting*. You. A bottom feeding mortal. And so he ignores me, even though I have so much more to offer. Me, who’s at least his fucking equal. What’s so special about you?”

Nothing Matthew said made any sense. Hannibal was losing blood, and his brain struggled to connect one thought to another. He had no answer.

“So. I’m going to ask you a few questions, while you still have enough blood coursing through your brain to answer them. Ready?”

“Ready,” Hannibal gasped.

“Do you know who Will really is?”

The question was unexpected. And the way Matthew asked it... How much more to Will was there? Was he a prince? An emperor? A double agent? There was far too much Hannibal didn’t know.

The bucket teetered. Hannibal said nothing.

“You know, I can ask you yes or no questions and you don’t have to say a word. I’ll know what the answer is.” He peered close at Hannibal, studying his face. “The pupil dilates with specific mental efforts. You dilate, that’s a ‘yes.’ No dilation is a ‘no.’ ... Are you willing to do anything it takes find him?”

Again Hannibal said nothing, but Matthew seemed pleased just the same.

“You’re a physician. How many times have you seen someone cling on to a life not really worth living? Eking out a last few seconds. Do you ever wonder why they bother?”

Clearly, Matthew was enjoying himself.

“I know why,” Hannibal ground out. “Life is precious.”

“Is it? Then why do mortals squander it? They spend all the time they have here on earth climbing social ladders. Showing off the biggest house, the prettiest garden. The nicest fucking vase. Assigning value and meaning to trivial things.”

Mortals? Hannibal lifted his head, meaning to question Matthew, but he was growing too weak.

“And those who don’t have anything end up spending their lives crawling around in the muck, and then they die. Forgotten, alone. Insignificant.”

Hannibal was losing too much blood. His legs wobbled and gave out. The bucket fell away, clattering loudly as it bounced and rolled to the floor. His body swung from the noose. His vision went black, then red. He was dying.

The door crashed open, and someone shouted. The torch was knocked off the wall and snuffed out. The scent of jasmine filled the room, enveloping Hannibal in a cocoon of tranquility. Distantly, he hoped whoever had come would avenge him. Or at least, that they were there to destroy Matthew. Vengeance could be a happy side effect.

As he faded, Hannibal felt arms around him. “I’ve got you, Hannibal. You’re safe, now.”

Hannibal wasn’t dead. He knew, because every inch of his body ached. He opened his eyes and was surprised to see his cousin’s face hovering over him. She was seated at the edge of the bed, pressing a cold cloth to his forehead.

“Ch... Chi-i...” He coughed. She offered him a drink of water, and after a long pull from the glass, he tried again. “Chiyoh. What in the world are you doing here?”

Chiyoh was impassive as she dabbed ointment across Hannibal’s throat. “I received a letter from your wife. There seemed to be some cause for concern, so I was on my way to see you.”

Slowly, Hannibal’s memory returned to him. Pain. Blood. Rope around his neck.

He inspected his arms. Where the cuts had been, there were long pink lines. Scars. As though they were long since healed. His throat was sore, but it didn’t feel as though it had been crushed by the weight of his own hanging body. All things considered, he felt rather... fine.

He frowned. “How long was I unconscious?”

“You were unconscious when I found you, so I cannot be certain. Two days, with me.”

That was not enough time for his wounds to heal this much. “What happened?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing. I discovered you in a ditch on the way to this village.”

“And which village might that be?”

“Wolf Trap.”

So he hadn't been taken far. But between the evening at the tavern and now, he had no way of knowing how many days had passed. Long enough, it seemed, for Bedelia to send a letter, and for Chiyoh to find him here. Hannibal tried to work it out in his head. At a good pace on horseback, it took five days for a messenger to get from Balt to Hannibal's old home.

"How long ago did you receive the letter?"

"Mm. Six days?"

Which meant, assuming Bedelia sent the letter the day he'd left, he'd been gone at least a week. That was a great deal more than he'd planned.

Hannibal's body protested as he sat up. Despite the improved state of his nastier wounds, everything hurt. "I've been away too long. And I've nothing at all to show for it except scars."

"And a bruised throat," Chiyoh added calmly.

"Yes, thank you, Chiyoh." Hannibal threw his legs over the side of the bed. The room spun and teetered. "You said my wife was... concerned. What exactly did she tell you in her letter?"

"She said you have developed a new obsession that threatens to consume you entirely. I was curious to see if she exaggerated."

"Oh? And have you come to any conclusions?"

Chiyoh pressed her lips together. To anyone else, it might have looked like irritation. But Hannibal knew she was trying not to smile. "I would say your wife's concerns are valid. Are you truly so obsessed that you would willingly put yourself in harm's way?"

Without hesitation, Hannibal answered, "Yes. He is... unique."

"Do you plan to collect him like a rare bauble?"

"No, of course not. I only wish to know him better. To dissect the inner workings of his mind."

This time, Chiyoh did smile. "He might object to dissection."

"I mean through conversation, Chiyoh. If you only heard him speak, you would understand."

Chiyoh made a doubtful sound, but she nodded. "Still, it seems quite dangerous. Whoever did this to you, it was not to rob you. I found your coin purse still intact."

"He certainly seemed intent on killing me."

"Why didn't he?"

"I'm not certain. I don't remember very much."

“We shouldn’t linger here.”

Pushing himself to his feet, Hannibal braced himself on the small bedside table. He took a moment to let the world right itself in his vision, then straightened. “Help me dress, please.”

Chiyoh sighed and helped Hannibal into his robes. Whether she didn’t have the energy to argue, or simply didn’t care, Hannibal wasn’t certain. Either way, he was grateful.

She packed their things and helped Hannibal down the stairs. While she headed for the stables, Hannibal went to the old woman at the counter. He didn’t expect to find Matthew, but he hoped he might find some answers.

“Pardon me, miss, but might Mister Brown be available?”

“I-I’m sorry, my Lord, I don’t know who that is.”

“He was here last night, I paid him for the room. He served me some wine.”

“Oh, that would be my husband, Mister Stammets.”

That couldn’t be right, of course. Presumably, Stammets would be much older, like his wife. Disappointed, Hannibal offered a polite smile. “It must have been, I suppose. Thank you for your hospitality, my lady.”

Hannibal met Chiyoh in the stables, relieved to find Homer still there, safe and sound.

“This man you seek...”

“Will?”

“Mm. You are determined to find him?” Chiyoh raised an eyebrow. *Should I be worried?*

“He is... fascinating. Not like anyone I’ve ever met before. We see the world in different ways, yet he can assume my point of view. Anyone’s.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve seen him do it. His powers of observation are exceeded only by his beauty.”

Chiyoh tilted her head, considering. “Does he see you? The truth of you?”

“I believe he does.” *A child who has lost his family in the cruelest circumstances.*

“It must feel nice, to be seen. You spend a lot of time building walls.” Chiyoh helped Hannibal get onto his horse before mounting her own. “It’s natural to want to see if anyone is clever enough to climb over them.”

Hannibal couldn’t deny it. His defenses were vast and impenetrable. He’d learned long ago the pain of being vulnerable. Attachments often brought disappointment, or terrible loss. But

Will had already rendered so many of those walls useless. He left Hannibal feeling raw and exposed, and hungry for more.

There was no going back to the way things were. The world was already filled with tedious people, trying to find meaning in trivial things. Matthew was right about that. With Will, Hannibal felt that there was something more to be known, something greater. Much the way he felt when taking apart a corpse. All the intricacies of the universe just within reach.

But to Chiyoh, he merely said, “Indeed,” as they headed for home.

The journey back felt long. It was only a day and a half, but all Hannibal could think about was Will. He’d gone looking for answers, and returned with more questions. The gaps in his memory were more than a little troubling.

Chiyoh did her best to be sympathetic in her own way, but she didn’t really understand. She hadn’t met Will, hadn’t seen him. And it was clear she had her doubts about Hannibal’s claims. She didn’t say it, but he could see in her expression that she thought he was losing his mind. Just like everyone else.

Hannibal’s home was crawling with soldiers. Bedelia stood in the foyer, expression cold as ice. At her side, Frederica argued with one of the soldiers, waving the shattered leg of a chair in his face.

“It seems we’ve returned at an awkward moment.”

Frederica whirled around, knocking the chair leg into Hannibal’s chest. “Awkward! Ha! Nice of you to come back, you careless beast! They’re raiding the kitchen! The pantry! The cellar!”

“Whatever for?”

“The meat is being confiscated. Apparently, some of the meat may be pieces of the missing Cohen girl.” Bedelia laid a hand on Frederica’s forearm and gently removed the chair leg from her grasp. “Hello, Chiyoh.”

Chiyoh inclined her head, the corner of her mouth curved up. “Apologies for my intrusion. Perhaps--”

Curling her lip, Frederica shot Bedelia a withering look. “Ugh! You had to say it again. Don’t call it meat!”

Bedelia sighed. "Refusing to acknowledge it doesn't change the possibility it's true."

"Why would we have such a thing in our home?" Hannibal led everyone away from the noisy soldiers, into the sitting room. "What happened?"

"It was the provisioner, Hobbs," Frederica said. "Someone saw him take a girl, and had soldiers sent to his house. They found her, and a whole room filled with things from a dozen other girls, at least!"

A frown tugged at Bedelia's brow. "How do you know that?"

"Because I saw it!"

"You went to the house? Frederica, if someone discovered you--"

"No one discovered me, they couldn't. I just had to see it for myself."

Quirking a brow, Chiyoh glanced at Freddie. "How can you be certain?"

"I just am. I made sure. Anyway, it was ghastly! I recognized the necklace Elise Nichols wore to that wedding, remember? The Gideons? And there were bits of hair and bones and *fingernai*--"

The sound of Bedelia's hand striking Frederica's face rang in Hannibal's ears. "Enough!" Bedelia shouted. Her hands curled into shaky fists. "You thoughtless creature! Does no one matter to you other than yourself?"

Blood trickled down from a small, angry welt on Frederica's cheek. One of Bedelia's rings had cut her. "You *harpy*! How dare you hit me! I'm not some lowly servant! You're not better than me, you selfis--"

"Ladies, please. This is not the time." Hannibal stepped between them. "Bedelia. If you are so concerned with our reputation you must control yourself. Everyone can hear your shrieking."

Bedelia narrowed her eyes. "How dare--"

"And Frederica. Do not forget your place in this house. You may not be a servant, but you are certainly not our equal. Get out of my sight, foolish wench."

Chiyoh snorted, then turned away and hid her face behind her hand.

Frederica turned almost as red as her hair. She held her tongue, but she glared daggers at Bedelia, then Hannibal, before storming off in a fury. Hannibal had no doubt that whatever plans she'd had in her mind, she meant to accelerate them. His house would burn rather sooner than expected.

"Eleven days, Hannibal," Bedelia said as soon as Frederica was out of sight. "You left us alone here for eleven days."

“And?”

“My friends have been asking questions. Whether you abandoned us. Whether or not you’re completely mad. Whether you’re fit to be the head of this house.”

“You and your friends are becoming quite tedious, Bedelia.”

A soldier ambled into the room, very pointedly not looking at anyone. “King Frederick requires your presence, Doctor. Immediately.”

“At the palace?” Hannibal asked.

“N-no, uh.” The soldier spared a quick glance at Bedelia. “The Hobbs house.”

“Ah. Of course. If you’ll excuse us a moment, I will be along shortly.”

The soldier made a hasty bow, then all but ran for the exit.

Once the soldier was out of sight, Hannibal grabbed Bedelia by the chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. “Whatever your friends are saying, my dear, it is your duty as my wife to defend me, is it not?”

Bedelia didn’t answer.

Hannibal’s grip tightened. “Is it not, Bedelia?”

Wrenching herself away, Bedelia glared. “Are you threatening me?”

“Believe me, Bedelia. If I was threatening you, you would know.” Hannibal gave her a wicked smile. “Now, show Chiyoh to her room. I have been summoned by the king.”

Hannibal didn’t wait for a response. There was no time. He couldn’t bathe or rest, nor change his clothes. The long trek home had left him exhausted and aching. His patience was worn thin, his nerves frayed. But when King Frederick summoned, one had to obey.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!